
22 September 1993

CIRCULAR

THE FURTHER EDUCATION FUNDING COUNCIL

ASSESSING ACHIEVEMENT

To

Principals of colleges
Others with an interest in the sector

Summary

Framework for inspections in the
further education sector,
incorporating amendments made
following consultation

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93/28

ASSESSING ACHIEVEMENT

INTRODUCTION

1 This circular contains the approved framework for inspections in the further education sector. It has been written in the light of responses to consultation on the draft framework which was circulated to colleges and others with an interest in the sector in April this year.

BACKGROUND

2 The draft framework set out in Circular 93/11 was based on the recommendations of a consultative group of college representatives and others with an interest in the sector and was chaired by the Council's chief inspector. Membership of the group was given in annex C of that circular.

RESPONSES TO CONSULTATION

3 Two hundred and fifty-nine responses to the consultative document were received. These comprised:

- 189 from individual colleges in the further education sector
- 10 from the higher education sector
- 6 from the independent further education sector
- 5 from training and enterprise councils
- 6 from local authorities
- 9 from individuals
- 34 from associations and organisations.

4 Responses from individual colleges summarised the views of the governors, the academic board, the senior management team and other representative groups within the college. The associations and organisations which responded represent a wide cross-section of those with an interest in further education.

5 Over 95 per cent of the responses were supportive of the approach to quality assessment proposed in Circular 93/11. An analysis and summary of the responses was considered by the Council at its meeting on 15 July 1993 and by the consultative group which provided further advice to the chief inspector on the structure and content of the inspection framework. The main modifications and points of clarification which have been

introduced as a result of the consultation relate to paragraphs 18, 28 and 38 of annex A to Circular 93/11 and are set out in the following paragraphs.

6 The proposal that colleges should prepare an internal quality assessment report in preparation for a four-yearly inspection was supported. However, responses indicated that colleges are at different stages in the development of their quality assurance systems and, in recognition of this, a more limited internal report will be requested in 1993-94 than in subsequent years.

7 The suggestion that colleges be invited to nominate a senior member of staff to participate in the inspection process was supported with reservations. In response to these reservations, the role of the internal nominee will be agreed with the principal of the college concerned, and the nominee will not contribute to decisions on quality grades.

8 The proposal that the chief inspector should invite a member of the local community to join the inspection team was not widely supported, but the importance of reflecting the views of the wider community in inspection reports was acknowledged. In the final version of the framework, this will be achieved by including on the inspection team whenever possible, a registered part-time inspector with recent experience outside the world of education. In addition, the team will meet with appropriate community representatives during the inspection.

9 A five-point scale of assessment grades was proposed in the consultative document. Some respondents considered that the wording of the grade descriptors was inconsistent. In the final version, the five grades are retained but the descriptors have been simplified and the inconsistencies removed. Although the consultative document did not propose an overall college grade, many respondents assumed that one would be assigned. The final version makes it clear that grades will be assigned to each major curriculum area which is inspected, and to a number of cross-college aspects of provision, but not to the college as a whole.

10 The final paragraph of the draft framework proposed that colleges should provide a written response to any inspection reports drawing attention to significant weaknesses. Following consultation, the requirement for a written response is extended to all four-yearly inspection reports.

11 Two matters not covered in the consultative document are dealt with in the final version:

- the inspection process will be evaluated by the inspection team and by the college being inspected
- the inspectorate's role in monitoring performance against the commitments in the charter for further education and each college's own charter is acknowledged.

12 The revised framework is attached as an annex to this circular. It takes account of the responses to Circular 93/11 and will constitute the inspectorate's main working document.

William Lucas

ANNEX

Inspection framework for colleges in the further education sector

ASSESSING ACHIEVEMENT

INTRODUCTION

Quality in Further Education

1 The Further and Higher Education Act 1992 (the Act) gives the Further Education Funding Council (the Council) the duty to ensure that satisfactory arrangements exist to assess the quality of education provided in colleges within the sector.

2 The Act also requires the Council to establish a quality assessment committee to advise them on the discharge of this duty. The composition of this committee was outlined in Council Report Number 6.

3 The tasks of the quality assessment committee will be:

- to advise the Council on the quality of education provided in colleges in the sector and in other institutions to which the Council provides financial support
- to recommend to the Council and to keep under review the methods for assessing quality
- to receive assessment reports on the quality of education and to advise on any necessary action
- to report annually to the Council, including an evaluation of education in the sector
- to advise on other matters as required from time to time by the Council.

4 The White Paper *Education and Training for the 21st Century* recognised three levels of quality assurance in further education:

- *quality control*: the mechanisms within colleges for maintaining and enhancing the quality of provision
- *examinations and validation*: the activities of external bodies such as the National Council for Vocational Qualifications, the Business & Technology Education Council, the City and Guilds of London Institute, the Royal Society of Arts and the GCE and GCSE boards which are responsible for guaranteeing the standards of their qualifications
- *external assessment*: independent assessment of the quality of teaching and learning in the colleges and of the standards being achieved by the students.

5 The primary responsibility for quality control rests with colleges. They are also responsible for overseeing assessments and examinations, and for complying with the standards of the validating and examining bodies.

6 It is at the third level of quality assurance, namely external assessment, that the active participation of the Council is required. To meet this responsibility the Council will rely on two approaches:

- the use of performance indicators
- quality assessment based on inspection.

7 The education service can learn from the approaches to quality and its assurance adopted in the business and industry sectors. However, the different aims and objectives of a public service, which take account of the needs of the community as a whole as well as those of individual consumers, must be reflected in its quality assurance arrangements. In this framework for inspection an attempt has been made to develop a distinctive approach to quality and its assessment in further education which recognises that provision must not only be fit for its purpose but should aim for high standards and excellence, should satisfy and involve the customer, should encourage continual improvement, and should enable the government to be assured that the large sums of money devoted to this sector of education are being well spent.

8 Such an approach requires the recognition that quality in further education is dependent on many interrelated factors. It is to do with the standards set and achieved, choice and diversity, the pursuit of scholarship and competence, order and structure, student achievement and all that supports teaching and learning. It is difficult to specify how these factors interrelate. For example, good practice is sometimes achieved in poor accommodation with poor resources. By contrast, poor teaching and learning sometimes occur in excellent accommodation supported by good resources. It is thus unrealistic to expect there to be a single method of delivering further education curricula to ensure a high quality student experience. It follows that the inspection framework has to be sufficiently flexible to allow for the different experiences and traditions of the sector's colleges and that it must also be sensitive to each institution's own aims, objectives, targets and criteria for success.

THE INSPECTION FRAMEWORK

9 This framework has been written following consultation with the sector and in a way which enables it to be adapted and applied to the inspection of specific curriculum areas or departments, as well as forming the basis for an institutional inspection. The problems inherent in employing a single inspection framework to deal with a diverse and rapidly changing sector, delivering many types of provision to a wide range of students, are acknowledged but the consultation process confirmed that the benefits of a single framework are considered to outweigh the disadvantages. The inspectorate will review the arrangements from time to time in the light of experience.

Organisation of the Inspectorate

10 In each of the nine regions of the Council there will be a senior inspector who will have oversight of all inspection activity in the region. Most senior inspectors will also have national responsibility for one or more major curriculum areas. The inspection programme will be delivered in each region by a core team of between five and nine full-time inspectors together with a larger number of registered part-time inspectors. Each inspector will have satisfactorily completed an induction and training programme covering the use of the inspection framework and the conduct of inspections. In addition, all part-time inspectors will have satisfactorily completed training inspections before being placed on the register.

11 A named full-time inspector will be assigned to each college. The main duties of the college inspector will be to:

- build up an in-depth knowledge of the college and its local context
- act as a first point of reference for the college with the inspectorate
- establish, with the college, an inspection programme
- monitor the college's response to the issues raised in assessment reports and offer advice as appropriate.

Inspection Principles

12 The following broad principles will guide all inspection activity:

- all inspections will be planned in consultation with the college and reflect the college's pattern of provision

- the college's own aims, objectives, targets and criteria for success will set the context for inspections
- the inspection process will embrace the direct observation of the delivery of the curriculum, monitoring of the college's performance against the commitments in the national charter for further education and the college's own charter, and evaluation of the college's strategy for monitoring and enhancing the quality of its own provision.

Types of Inspection

13 The inspection cycle for each college will cover four years. Within the four-year cycle there will be three basic types of inspection:

- by the college inspector, to carry out the duties outlined in paragraph 11
- by specialist inspectors, working singly or in small teams and concentrating on particular areas of the curriculum or specific cross-college issues
- four-yearly team inspections which will clarify, supplement and update the information gathered through the four-year cycle.

The first two types of inspection will not lead to published reports, but a written note of the main conclusions will be sent to the college. The third type of inspection will lead to a published report.

Composition of Inspection Teams

14 For each four-yearly inspection of a college, a team of full-time and part-time registered inspectors will be assembled which reflects the size of the college and the nature of its provision. To reflect the views of the wider community on the inspection team, whenever possible, at least one of the part-time inspectors will have recent experience outside the world of education.

15 Colleges will be invited to nominate a senior member of staff to act as first point of contact with the inspectorate and to participate in the team inspection by joining team meetings, interpreting evidence and clarifying uncertainties. The precise role of the internal nominee during team inspections will be agreed with the principal of the college. In principle the nominee will be able to participate in all aspects of the inspection but will not contribute to decisions on quality grades.

Structure of Reports

16 All four-yearly reports will be published to a common format. Each report will start with a brief summary of the main conclusions arising from the inspection. To assist in putting the rest of the report in context, each report will have an initial section entitled 'the college and its aims'. This will provide a brief description of the college, its location, the socio-economic environment in which it operates and its aims, objectives, targets and criteria for success as embodied in its strategic plan. This section of the report will be prepared in consultation with the college nominee to the team.

17 The main body of the report will set out the inspection team's judgements of the strengths and weaknesses of the following aspects of the college:

- responsiveness and range of provision
- governance and management
- students' recruitment, guidance and support
- teaching and the promotion of learning
- students' achievements
- quality assurance
- resources.

The guidance notes in appendix A provide details of the issues which will be covered under each of these broad headings.

18 The final section of the report, the 'conclusions and issues', will summarise the college's achievements and any weaknesses, and suggest priorities for action in order to maintain and enhance the quality of provision. An annex will contain statistical indicators and the inspection team's assessment grades. Any college data considered essential for an understanding of the report will be contained in appendices.

Inspection Evidence

19 Inspectors' main sources of evidence will be:

- direct observation of the delivery of the curriculum: that is, the observation of training, teaching and other activities designed to promote learning
- inspection of students' work
- discussions with individuals or groups with an interest in, or view on, the quality of the college's provision, eg, students or former students, college staff, governors,

parents, employers, representatives of local training and enterprise councils, and community representatives

- examination of documentary evidence provided by the college.

Guidance on the range of documentary evidence which inspectors will wish to see either during, or in advance of, inspections is given in appendix B.

20 Four types of documentary evidence will be particularly useful in setting the context for any inspection activity:

- the college's mission statement or statement of purpose, its strategic plan and annual operating plan, the college charter
- the college's standard set of performance indicators as agreed following consultation between the Council and the sector, together with any internal performance indicators used by the college staff to help assess the extent to which they are achieving the targets which they set for themselves
- reports from examining, validating and accrediting bodies, and the college's responses to those reports
- the findings of the college's own quality assurance procedures as expressed in an internal quality assessment report.

21 In relation to the latter item, the Council's inspectorate recognises that some colleges in the sector have highly developed quality assurance systems in operation, while other colleges are at a much earlier stage in the development of such systems.

22 As a minimum requirement, each college involved in a four-yearly team inspection during the 1993-94 academic year will be requested to summarize its own quality assurance procedures and to state the main conclusions arising from those procedures. In future years colleges will be asked to produce a brief (about five sides of A4) self-assessment report based on the findings of their own quality assurance procedures, which covers the seven aspects of the college set out in paragraph 17. The report should state, and provide supporting evidence for, the college's own assessment of its strengths and weaknesses as a basis for discussion with the inspection team.

Quality Assessment

23 Inspectors will assess the strengths and weaknesses of each aspect of provision they inspect. Annex A provides guidelines on the kind of strengths which inspectors might expect to find in a good college.

24 Inspectors' assessments will be set out clearly in the text of their reports. They will also summarise their judgements on the balance between strengths and weaknesses using a five-point scale, on which grade one represents provision of the highest quality:

- grade 1 - provision which has many strengths and very few weaknesses
- grade 2 - provision in which the strengths clearly outweigh the weaknesses
- grade 3 - provision with a balance of strengths and weaknesses
- grade 4 - provision in which the weaknesses clearly outweigh the strengths
- grade 5 - provision which has many weaknesses and very few strengths.

25 An assessment grade will be assigned to each major curriculum area which is inspected and will be based primarily, but not exclusively, on the teaching and promotion of learning and the students' achievements in that curriculum area.

26 In addition, in the four-yearly published reports, a grade will be assigned to each of the following cross-college aspects of provision:

- responsiveness and range of provision
- governance and management
- students' recruitment, guidance and support
- quality assurance
- resources.

27 In relation to assessment grades, the following points are stressed:

- grades for individual curriculum areas and aspects of provision cannot be meaningfully aggregated to provide an overall college grade
- individual grades provide very limited information without reference to the details of the judgements which underlie them

- grades related to resources may reflect factors which are outside a college's immediate control.

Reporting and Follow-up

28 Following inspections which take place in the periods between the four-yearly team inspections, the judgements made will be discussed with the staff concerned and a written note of the main conclusions will be sent to the college. Where appropriate, these judgements will be taken into account in preparing the four-yearly assessment report.

29 Subsequent to a four-yearly team inspection a report will be written for publication. This will draw on information gathered throughout the four-year cycle, clarified, supplemented and updated as appropriate by the team inspection. In the week after a team inspection one or more inspectors will return to the college to outline the main inspection findings to representatives of the college's senior management and governors, who will be able to use this opportunity to correct any errors of fact.

30 The inspectorate intends that there should be no more than six working weeks from the conclusion of a team inspection to the publication of the report. The Council will, in the normal course of events, distribute a limited number of copies of inspection reports, but it will make it known that reports are available to any member of the public. Colleges will be expected to distribute copies of the report or its summary to local employers, local schools, students and potential students, parents and others.

31 Following a four-yearly inspection report, colleges will be required to provide a written response outlining their plans for addressing any weaknesses identified in the report. Since the main purpose of quality assessment is to maintain and enhance quality across the sector, inspectors will monitor colleges' responses to assessment reports and, where appropriate, offer advice on the implementation of any action colleges take in the light of the inspection findings.

Evaluation of the Inspection Process

32 Every four-yearly team inspection will be subjected to two separate evaluations:

- evaluation by the inspection team
- evaluation by the college being inspected.

The inspection framework consultative group has offered some initial advice on evaluation methods and these will be developed and refined during the inspections carried out in 1993-94.

Getting Started

33 This framework outlines the inspection arrangements as they will apply when the four-year cycles of inspections become established. In the early years, and in 1993-94 in particular, some modifications of these arrangements will be necessary.

34 The first team inspections will be carried out in the autumn term of 1993. College inspectors will not have had time to build up an in-depth knowledge of the colleges to which they are assigned and there will have been little or no opportunity to carry out the first two types of inspections discussed in paragraph 13. These inevitable limitations will be acknowledged in the subsequent published reports.

APPENDIX A

Inspection guidelines

These guidelines provide further details of the issues which will be addressed under each of the aspects of a college which are set out in paragraph 17. They are expressed as a set of positive features or strengths which inspectors might expect to encounter in a good college. The guidelines are not intended as a checklist. Every college and every inspection is unique. Nor should the guidelines be regarded as exhaustive or fixed in time. Responsive colleges adapt to changing circumstances, as do views on what constitutes a strength or weakness. The inspection process itself can be expected to identify strengths other than those listed in the guidelines. In other words, quality assessment is a dynamic process involving a constant dialogue between the assessors and the assessed. The guidelines are set out under the same seven headings as those in paragraph 17.

Responsiveness and Range of Provision

- The staff are aware of and respond to the government's aims and policies for further education, the national education and training targets, and the requirements of the Council.
- There is effective liaison with local schools, local education authorities, other further and higher education institutions, training and enterprise councils, employers, parents, community representatives and the Council's regional office.
- There are arrangements for identifying local employment and other needs and for monitoring the satisfaction with the service of those who use it.
- There is a range of programmes and services which meets the needs of potential clients, for example:
 - school-leavers and mature students
 - students whose attendance patterns necessitate distance or open learning
 - students with disabilities and/or learning difficulties
 - employers, including those seeking full-cost courses, assessment services and consultancy.
- Programmes are effectively marketed and those which are no longer demonstrably meeting a need are revised or replaced.

- There is access to, and participation in, post-compulsory education by groups traditionally under-represented in further education.
- Equality of opportunity is promoted and discriminatory practices are avoided.

Governance and Management

- The institution's governors fulfil their duties effectively and take interest in the institution's activities.
- The institution's desired ethos and its aims, objectives, targets and criteria for success, as embodied in the strategic and operating plans are understood and supported by staff and reflected in departmental and/or programme aims and objectives.
- The responsibilities for implementing and monitoring policies relating to matters such as equal opportunities, health and safety, student support and environmental issues are clearly allocated.
- The management structure and lines of communication and accountability are clear and understood.
- Staff and other resources are effectively deployed and the institution's strategy for financial allocation is clear and understood.
- Appropriate attention is given to efficiency: unit costs are calculated at appropriate levels; the reasons for justifiable differences from internal and external norms are understood; reasons for unjustifiable differences are sought and action taken.
- Management information is efficiently collected and disseminated and effectively utilised.
- Enrolment targets are set and achieved.
- Retention rates are monitored: reasons are sought for unusually low rates and action is taken.
- Student destinations are monitored: reasons are sought for unusually low progression rates to higher or continuing further education and employment and action is taken.

Students' Recruitment, Guidance and Support

- Before entry, students are provided with information and impartial guidance which ensure that they embark on programmes

of study which match their achievements and aims.

- There are appropriate arrangements to assess and accredit prior learning and experience.
- Following entry there are effective induction programmes for new students.
- Procedures are in place to facilitate transfer between programmes where appropriate.
- Throughout the programmes, all students have access to effective tutorial support, personal counselling and guidance and careers education and guidance.
- Students are enabled and encouraged to maintain their personal record of achievement.
- The attendance of students is monitored, reasons are sought for persistent absence and appropriate action is taken.
- Students are advised of their rights and responsibilities.

Teaching and the Promotion of Learning

For programmes of study as a whole, course and programme teams:

- devise coherent programmes which meet the needs of students and have clearly identified aims and objectives which are shared with the students
- keep records of students' achievements, regularly inform them of their progress and identify targets for further progress
- assess and meet the needs of students with disabilities and/or learning difficulties
- devise teaching and learning schemes which
 - ensure adequate coverage of the topics on the syllabus and specified competencies
 - ensure that all the aims and objectives of the programmes are achieved
 - challenge and extend students' skills, knowledge and understanding and encourage their personal development
 - take account of the different abilities of students on the programme
 - include a regular schedule of setting, marking and returning work to students within agreed deadlines

- devise assessments which are at an appropriate standard and test the achievement of all the agreed aims and objectives of the programme
- ensure that assessments are consistent and fair, that appropriate appeals procedures are in place, and that achievement is certificated where appropriate.

In addition, in their dealings with students, staff:

- establish good relationships which promote the achievement of learning
- set the learning in the context of what has gone before and make it clear what it is intended to achieve
- ensure that the interest of students is engaged and sustained
- choose a variety of teaching and learning approaches which are appropriate for the subject being studied and encourage students to work on their own or in groups
- reinforce learning through the use of teaching and learning aids
- display sound knowledge and understanding of their subject area
- provide information or instructions clearly, at a pace and level which meet the needs and abilities of the students
- check regularly that learning has been achieved.

Students' Achievements

During their programmes of study, bearing in mind their previous achievements and the objectives they have agreed with the institution, students:

- enjoy their studies and, when appropriate, speak and write about their work clearly and with enthusiasm
- develop appropriate levels of knowledge and understanding of the subjects they are studying and an ability to apply their knowledge and understanding
- when required, work effectively as members of a group
- develop appropriate study skills, mathematical and information technology skills and any other core skills which form an agreed part of their learning programme
- carry out practical work competently and safely.

For students who have completed, or partially completed programmes of study there is evidence that:

- students' responses to internal assessments are at an appropriate standard
- the programme targets for success rates in external examinations and other assessments and added value ratings are achieved.

Quality Assurance

- All members of staff are aware of and respond to the commitments in the national charter for further education and the college's own charter.
- At the institutional level there is an overall policy on quality and its assurance and control which is understood and supported by the staff and, where appropriate, the academic board.
- The institution's policy is implemented through a strategy for setting standards and targets, monitoring progress towards their achievement, and periodically reviewing them to achieve continuous quality improvement.
- The strategy for quality monitoring and enhancement includes the collection and systematic use of performance indicators.
- The strategy for quality monitoring and enhancement meets the needs of the institution and also takes account of the needs of the examining, validating and accrediting bodies and the Council's inspectorate.
- At the programme level, the institution's policy on quality is supported by the regular production of reports which incorporate reliable statistics on student progression and achievement and evaluative comments on the quality of all aspects of the programme from a variety of sources including students, internal and external assessors and, where appropriate, employers and other clients.
- The strategy for quality monitoring and enhancement includes linked programmes of staff appraisal and staff development.
- The staff development programme includes:
 - an induction programme for all staff which incorporates the development of relevant skills
 - opportunities for all staff to discuss

their development needs in the context of programme and institutional priorities and plans

- strategies for meeting staff development needs, disseminating the outcomes and evaluating the effectiveness of the various activities.

Resources

- The institution makes efficient and effective use of its financial, physical and human resources and has in place systems to ensure this.
- There are sufficient teachers with appropriate qualifications and experience to cover all aspects of the programmes offered.
- Learning is adequately supported by competent technical, administrative and clerical staff.
- The size and lay-out of the accommodation are suitable for the courses and programmes of study and adequate to meet the needs of students with physical disabilities.
- The accommodation is appropriately furnished, decorated, cleaned and maintained and the college provides a stimulating and supportive learning environment.
- The accommodation is flexibly and efficiently utilised.
- Students have access to off-site learning environments where appropriate.
- There is an adequate range of teaching and learning aids.
- There is sufficient specialist equipment and information technology equipment.
- Adequate library facilities and other learning support materials and resources are available and accessible to all students.

The guidelines have been kept as brief as possible, and are couched in general terms. To further enhance consistency of approach between inspectors, additional guidelines relating to specific topics will be developed in the form of aides memoire. Many of the responses to Circular 93/11 contained suggestions which will be incorporated into aides memoire. To remain relevant and up to date, most aides memoire will need to be reviewed frequently. They will be shared with the sector both during their development and when they are used on inspections.

APPENDIX B

Guidelines on documentation for inspections

These guidelines provide further details of the kinds of documentary evidence inspectors are likely to request in order to help them form their judgements. Some of the documents relate to the college as a whole, others to departments or curriculum areas. Inspectors are likely to request that copies of some of them be made available in advance of the inspection, and that others be made available at the time of the inspection. Some, such as examples of students work, may need to be collected from students. Inspectors will discuss their exact requirements with the college in advance of any inspection. The guidelines follow the same headings as those in appendix A.

Responsiveness and Range of Provision

College prospectus; college charter; development plans for departments or programmes as appropriate; documents relating to external links, market research, course marketing; policy and practice for students with disabilities or learning difficulties, non-standard entrants and any other groups requiring special attention.

Governance and Management

College strategic plan; documents on management structure, organisation, financial allocation, management information systems; minutes of governors' meetings; unit costs; enrolment targets and actual enrolments; completion rates and destination statistics.

Students' Recruitment, Guidance and Support

Policy and practice on student recruitment, diagnostic assessment, induction, accreditation of prior learning, personal tutoring, counselling and guidance, careers education and guidance

Teaching and the Promotion of Learning

Examples of student's programmes and of action plans of individual students; course documents provided for students; teaching schemes; policy and practice on in-course assessment, records of achievement, learning support.

Students' Achievements

Examples of students' work and their records of achievement; students' responses to internal assessments including marked tests and examination papers; examination results and value added statistics.

Quality Assurance

The institution's policy on quality assurance and its strategy for quality monitoring and enhancement; the college charter; internal and external reports on quality, student feedback and college responses; departmental/programme reports; minutes of committees charged with aspects of quality monitoring and enhancement; staff development policy; details of recent staff development activities and their evaluation.

Resources

Details of staff numbers and qualifications; student to staff ratios; outline of accommodation available; accommodation utilisation data; details of teaching equipment and replacement/updating strategy; policy and practice on provision of, or charging for, textbooks, materials and learning resources for students; information on resources available for off-site learning activities.

